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PLAN OF STEPHEN F. AUSTIN FOR AN INSTITUTE  
OF MODERN LANGUAGES AT SAN  
FELIPE DE AUSTIN.<sup>1</sup>

MATTIE AUSTIN HATCHER.

One of the public questions that appealed most strongly to Stephen F. Austin, who was deeply interested in every subject relating to the welfare of the colonists under his care, was that of public education. As soon as he had been relieved of the heaviest burdens connected with the organization and direction of the government of his colony by the formation of an *ayuntamiento*, he began to work out a plan for the establishment of an academy or college at San Felipe de Austin, and he did not abandon the project until the more pressing matter of discord between the colonists and the Mexican government demanded his attention. First, he had to try to bring harmony into the ranks of the colonists who, until this time, had allowed sectional differences to prevent them from establishing a school of any kind. Then it was necessary to interest the Mexican government in order that the school might be placed upon a legal basis and be endowed with lands from the public domain. In the hope of accomplishing this aim, he drew up during his term of service as deputy for Texas in the Congress of Coahuila and Texas, the preliminary draft of a decree, providing for the establishment of an Institute of Modern Languages at San Felipe, to be presented to that body for its adoption.<sup>2</sup> Although the plan fell through, the subject is of considerable interest as showing the troubles of a pioneer in the cause of public education in Texas.

<sup>1</sup>A paper read at the Annual Meeting of the Texas State Historical Association, March 2, 1908. All materials made use of in the preparation of it are to be found in the Austin Papers in the archives of the University of Texas.

<sup>2</sup>There are two rough drafts of this decree with no essential differences. I have followed the more complete copy. The document is undated, but was probably written while Austin was serving as deputy (1831-1832). It was certainly prepared after his election to office; for in the first draft of the preliminary remarks accompanying the decree he refers to himself as deputy.

If we consider the condition of affairs in the colony, where the greater part of the energies of the settlers was expended in trying to win their homes from the wilderness, we shall see that the ground was but poorly prepared for the seed, and we shall not be surprised to find that Austin met with the discouragements usually encountered by one in advance of his times. Again, to arouse in the Mexican government an interest which would result in any effective action was no light task; for, in spite of the fact that this government had made after its own fashion several attempts to promote education in Texas, they had all been unenergetic and abortive, and no material advance had been made before Austin began to work on the plan with which this paper deals.<sup>1</sup>

Austin himself had done some preliminary work on behalf of education in the colony, which calls for attention in connection with the subject of this paper. According to his contract with the government for the colonization of four hundred families in Texas, dated April 27, 1825<sup>2</sup> he was required to promote the establishment of schools in the Spanish language in such towns as he might found. The constitution of Coahuila and Texas, ratified March 11, 1827, provided also that there should be a uniform method of instruction throughout the state, and required Congress to form a general plan for public instruction. In conformity with the spirit of these requirements, Austin had been endeavoring for several years before his plan took definite shape<sup>3</sup> to arouse an interest along educational lines among the colonists, by urging upon them the necessity for a permanent public school to be located at San Felipe. There are among his papers the first drafts of several letters written to his friends with the double purpose of securing their co-operation and of ascertaining, as far as possible, the sentiments of the colonists in regard to the question. Many of the replies also are preserved. Although this evidence is but fragmentary, it serves to forecast failure; for it shows two clearly defined objections made by the settlers. In the first place, they

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Cox, "Educational Efforts in San Fernando," Part II, in *THE QUARTERLY*, VI, 35-63.

<sup>2</sup>Gammel, *Laws of Texas*, I, 47-48.

<sup>3</sup>The earliest evidence of the definite plan that I have found is in the letter of Austin to J. H. Bell, February 24, 1829, which is quoted a little further on.

were unwilling to allow the *ayuntamiento* to have a voice in the management of schools; and, in the second place, they were unwilling to have the school located at San Felipe.

The first person Austin sought to interest in his plan was his close friend, J. H. Bell.<sup>1</sup> On February 24, 1829, he wrote Mr. Bell, saying:

\* \* \* Mr. Pilgrim proposes to teach a school. I am pleased with him so far as I have been able to judge. My opinion on this subject is that we should all unite with a view of establishing a permanent academy at this place. If we now commence on this basis, I have no doubt of succeeding, and if the subject is pushed and properly laid before the Govt., I have no doubt of obtaining a liberal endowment of funds. I fear that a division in the minds of the people as to where the academy ought to be located would totally defeat the object, and for this reason I am in favor of engaging Mr. Pilgrim to establish a school here permanently and that measures be adopted without delay to raise funds by subscription for a suitable house, large enough to accommodate about 100 scholars. I have drawn a plan which I send you.

This subject is a very important one; it has always been a favorite one with me, and I think an effort should now be made to get this school under way; it can be added to afterwards. In fact it will naturally increase as its reputation becomes known and I fear that if the present opportunity passes of getting a permanent teacher another may not o[ccur so<sup>2</sup>]on. I will, however, unite in support of any general plan to establish schools which will do the most public good. \* \* \*

Your friend,

Feb. 24, 1829.

S. F. Austin.

On March 13, 1829, Bell answered Austin's letter as follows:

\* \* \* I received your letter on the subject of establishing a school, and have spoken to the people. Generally they are all willing to give it liberal support, but object intirely to sending their children to San Felipe. In fact they are so disgusted with the preceedings at that place that there is nothing that centers there that they will have anything to do with. As to my own part I would do any way that a majority might think best. \* \* \*

J. H. Bell.

Austin immediately replied:

<sup>1</sup>See p. 232 above, note 3.

<sup>2</sup>Obliterated.

\* \* \* It is the interest of each man who lives in this colony or in this section of the country to encourage the improvement and advancement of this town. The day will come when a selection must be made for the seat of Govt. of Texas. The people of this jurisdiction should keep that object in view and by pushing forward this place pave the way to its location here. If we can get decent public buildings and an academy under way and have the place otherwise improved so thus to afford comfortable accommodations, this place stands a better chance to be the seat of government than any other point in Texas. \* \* \* Everyone who does or says anything to retard the advance of this place is actually doing an injury to himself. \* \* \* I calculated the chances for this place to be the future seat of government many years ago and I was then of the opinion that the people of this colony could make it the seat of government if they took the right course and I am of the same opinion still.

The academy is a very important matter and I hope you will aid us some from that quarter of the country. If we can get it under way I have no doubt the Govt. will aid us. I will devote a great deal to this object if it goes on, for independent of the good that will result to the children of the colony, it will give a favorable character to it abroad.

Your friend,

March 17, 1829.

Stephen F. Austin.

On March 25, 1829, Austin received an answer to a letter he had written a Mr. Martin for the purpose of ascertaining the feelings of the people of this gentleman's neighborhood in regard to the matter. The illiteracy of this reply shows quite clearly the need for some kind of a school in the colony; although, to judge from it alone, one might doubt the advisability of trying to establish any other than a primary school. The writer's favor, however, for education is in sharp and encouraging contrast with his own evident want of it. He states that he has interviewed certain persons in regard to the plans for the academy, but finds them bitterly opposed to placing such funds as may be subscribed for the erection of a school building in the hands of the *ayuntamiento*, although the people declare themselves perfectly willing to subscribe liberally if the school can be placed on a satisfactory basis. This, the writer believes, is the sentiment prevailing throughout his neighborhood. After giving his own opinion of the *ayuntamiento*, in no measured terms, he suggests a plan which, in his

belief, will be satisfactory to all, with the possible exception of the *ayuntamiento*. He proposes that Austin himself shall name seven or eight men from the various parts of the settlement to act as a committee with power to decide upon the advisability of establishing the proposed school, and to elect the trustees and other necessary officers provided the decision be favorable.

In spite of the opposition thus encountered, the plan was not given up. In fact, in San Felipe itself, the prospects for success seemed flattering; for on April 16, 1829, in another letter to J. H. Bell, Austin gives the following account of the progress of the work:

\* \* \* Our academy subscription goes on very well there is over thirteen hundred dollars subscribed and I think we shall be able to get a brick building. I am anxious to see the matter succeed for I think it will be attended with much public good.

Only one letter showing any attempt of Austin's to interest the Mexican authorities at this time has been found among his papers. This was written to him on June 4, 1829, by Juan Antonio Padilla in answer to one written him by Austin on the question of schools. Padilla expressed his willingness to help secure a capable teacher, and reported that the government was very much interested in schools at that time.

The final development of Austin's plan appears in the form of the preliminary draft of a decree already mentioned, together with the explanatory remarks to be made on presenting it. This draft was written in Spanish, and a translation<sup>1</sup> follows:

H.[onorable] C.[ongress:]

The colonies which have been planted in the unsettled portions of Texas by a number of *empresarios*—under the protection and auspices of the government—having happily flourished, begin to find themselves in that advanced state which demands the establishment of certain institutions fitted for settled countries. Among these, public schools for the teaching of modern languages, and especially that of Spanish, are of prime importance. These colonies are composed of both foreigners and Mexicans; and the necessity for disseminating the national language among the former is evident. They themselves are fully convinced of this necessity and have made various efforts to found a school by

<sup>1</sup>By the writer of this paper.

means of voluntary contributions. Up to this time, however, these efforts have had no successful outcome—not because of a lack of willingness to contribute, but for the want of a legal and permanent arrangement which would give a legal existence to the institution and assure the protection of the government and of the laws and the faithful use of the funds contributed for the charitable objects and public uses intended by the donors. For the purpose of overcoming this obstacle, and seeking the general good of the state, which will be greatly advanced by the establishment of a literary institution—and particularly one whose principal object is the extension of the national language among a portion of the inhabitants of the state who do not know it. The undersigned deputies from Texas have the honor to present for the consideration of Your Honorable Body, the preamble and outline of the following decree:

Realizing the importance of encouraging, by every possible means, the teaching of the Spanish language in the new colonies of Texas; complying with the desires, expressed by the inhabitants of the principal one of these, for the founding of a school of Modern Languages by means of voluntary contributions; and wishing to give a legal existence to the said institution by placing it under the protection of the government and of the laws—thus assuring the careful application of the funds to the beneficent purposes intended by the donors—the Congress of the State of Coahuila and Texas has thought well to decree the following:

Art. 1. There is authorized the establishment of a literary institution in the town of Austin,<sup>1</sup> Texas, under the protection and direction of the government, to have the name Institute of Modern Languages.

Art. 2. It shall be endowed with unappropriated lands belonging to the Department of Bexar, and with such funds as may be voluntarily contributed by private individuals.

Art. 3. It shall have one rector, three professors, a treasurer, and a board of directors, which shall be composed of the curate of the said town, of the rector of the three professors, and of six directors whom the chief of the department shall name from the twelve proposed by the *ayuntamiento*.

Art. 4. The six directors named in the list of the *ayuntamiento* and not selected by the chief, shall be alternates and shall fill such vacancies as may occur in the order in which their names come in the list as arranged by the chief. All shall be chosen anew in the month of March of each year. Members shall be eligible for re-election and free to accept or refuse a new nomination only in the second year as the office is held like a municipal office.

<sup>1</sup>That is, San Felipe de Austin.

Art. 5. The rector shall be the president of the board of directors and shall have general supervision over the professors, the employees, the pupils, and the business of the institution in all its branches and departments. He must be master of the Spanish and English languages.

Art. 6. Of the professors, the first shall be teacher of Spanish, the second, of English, and the third, of French; and they shall teach the pupils to speak, read, and write the elements of these languages.

Art. 7. In addition to the three languages mentioned, arithmetic, geography, mathematics, history, rhetoric, constitutional law, philosophy, astronomy and chemistry shall be taught in the institution. These studies shall be distributed among the rector and the professors in the order prescribed by the internal rules of the institution.

Art. 8. The board of directors shall have a secretary selected from its own body by a plurality of votes. The duties of the board shall be as follows:

1st. To manage all the lands and funds of the institution.

2nd. To name the rector, the professors, the treasurer, and all the inferior employees of the institution.

3d. To draw up the rules for the organization and government—both internal and external—of the institution in all its branches and departments; to fix the duties and responsibilities of the rector, the professors, and the other employees; and to designate their salaries, provided that neither the rector nor the professors shall have a vote in fixing or changing the salaries of any of the four positions they may occupy.

4th. To receive with the knowledge of, and from the hands of, the *ayuntamiento* the gifts or voluntary contributions to the general funds of the institution, or to any particular branch—be it lands, money or goods.

5th. To decide about the building of houses and chapels or the making of other improvements, and about the buying of books and instruments as far as the funds will permit and as circumstances require.

6th. To establish a department separate from the main building for the education of girls, and to form rules for its control.

7th. To adopt a seal for the institution.

Art. 9. The institution can sue and be sued through the president of the board of directors.

Art. 10. On the first Monday of the month of February of each year, the secretary—after due approval by the board—shall present to the *ayuntamiento* an exact account of the management



of all the funds which may be under the charge of the said board. This account shall be placed in the archives, one copy shall be published, and another shall be sent to the chief of the department. The rector, likewise, shall present a memorial of the branches under his charge. This also shall be placed in the archives, a copy published, and one sent to the chief of the department.

Art. 11. Each director and employee of the institution shall be responsible with his own private property—and that too in preference to any other liability or debt—for any misappropriation or fraud in the administration of the funds of the institution which may either be committed or knowingly permitted; and they may be called to account for the same, in favor of the institution, by the *ayuntamiento*, or by any of the directors or employees for that year.

Art. 12. The governor of the State, the chief of the department, the chief of the district, and the *ayuntamiento* may visit the institution whenever they may consider it proper; and the *ayuntamiento* must visit it each year during the months of February and October; and shall give an account to the government, through the proper official, of the result of this visit.

Art. 13. There shall be ceded in full possession to the said institution eleven *sitios* of territory from the unappropriated lands in the Department of Bexar lying along the San Jacinto, the Brazos, the Colorado, and La Vaca Rivers or in their vicinity. They shall be outside the limits of the ten littoral leagues along the coast. The directors shall choose the said *sitios* all together or separately, as may seem best to them. The title to the same shall be issued by the chief of the said department upon the request of the president of the board of directors.

Art. 14. The lands conceded by the previous article can not be leased for a continuous period of more than five years, and they can not be sold, either in part or as a whole, without the previous approval of Congress upon the request of the board of directors accompanied by a report from the *ayuntamiento* and the chief of the department. The said lands and all the property and funds of the institution shall be free from all taxes or duties whatsoever.

Art. 15. The *ayuntamiento* of the town of Austin shall be authorized to make a gift to the institution of such *solares* belonging to the town as may be necessary for the buildings.

Art. 16. Within three months from the publication of this decree, the *ayuntamiento* of this town shall propose twelve persons to the chief of the department, and he shall name the six directors as provided for by Articles 3 and 4.

Art. 17. In the absence of the rector, the curate of Austin shall serve as president of the board of directors; and in the absence of

the curate, the board shall name a president *ad interim* from its own body.

Art. 18. When the organization of the school shall be finished, and the rules for its government formed, a copy of all shall be sent to the Congress of the state for its approval. In the meantime, the board may make temporary rules, completing them and filling the positions in the institution as the funds permit and circumstances require.

Here the evidence afforded by the Austin papers abruptly ends, and we are left to wonder whether the bill was ever presented; or whether, the times proving inauspicious, the question was dropped altogether to take up the more important one of resisting the tyranny of the government. At any rate the years of earnest and faithful work for the success of this commendable object were fruitless of tangible results.